

THE AUTHORITY MACHINE

BY: REV. R.C. SPROUL, JR., © 2003

We all use shorthand in our language. Some of it puzzles me. Consider this. I'm at your house for dinner. I ask you if you mind if I use your phone. "I need to check my machine," I tell you. You will know exactly what I mean by that, this despite the many machines at my home. I have a machine to dry my clothes, and one to wash them, a machine to cool my food, and machines to heat my food. When I get off the phone you wouldn't ask, "So, is your lawn mower okay?" I have friends who have as their message (see, you know what I mean by "message"): "You have reached Ken and Annette's message recorder..." It's no wonder he is specific, he has more machines than anyone I know.

Suppose now that I enter into your house with you and you discover that someone has thrown a rock through your window, or made off with your computer. If I said that I was going to call the authorities, again you would know exactly what I was talking about. But suppose instead that upon entering your house we find everything in order. You say to me, "You know, I think this whole trinity doctrine is just a horrible jumbled mess. I think there's only one person, not three." And if I said at that point that maybe I had better call the authorities, you'd probably think that I'd lost my mind. You wouldn't think that maybe I was going to call the Session of the church, to let them know that you were in danger of slipping into heresy.

The authorities serve as a sort of short hand for the police, or government authorities. I wonder how they earned that moniker. I'm quite certain that they're delighted to have it. They certainly are an authority, for they bear the sword not in vain. But they are not the authority. The trouble is, of course, that we often treat them as if they were the only authority. Some of us treat the state as a moral authority, as the supreme arbiter of right and wrong. That is that we judge an action as moral if it is legal, immoral if it is not. Some of us even see the state as the moral authority when we enjoin the state to make every sin a crime. Anytime I say, "Such and such should not be illegal" the objection I always hear first is, "How can you say that such and such is okay to do?" The objection belies a heart that recognizes only one authority.

We also treat the state as an authority different from what authority that it is. We do this when we go to the state with our squabbles in the church. Paul sternly rebukes the Corinthians, "Does any one of you, when he has a case against his neighbor dare to go to law before the unrighteous, and not before the saints? Or do you not know that the saints will judge the world? And if the world is judged by you, are you not competent to constitute the smallest law courts? Do you not know that we shall judge angels? How much more matters of this life? If then you have law courts dealing with matters of this life, do you appoint them as judges who are of no account in the church?" (I Corinthians 6:1-4).

Wow. But we still do it. But it is not only with lawsuits that we appoint the state as our judge. Most churches in these United States do the same implicitly. Most churches are incorporated, which means that they have gone to the state and asked the state to create them. Incorporation is a legal fiction, whereby that which is not becomes a reality. In doing so the church affirms legally that the state has authority over it. If the state determines that the church isn't serving the purposes of the state, it can not only shut down the church, but take it over, and appoint the elders of its choice. Some argue that the state serves a legitimate function here, that they must distinguish between real and false churches. But again, any church which grants the state that authority has no grounds to complain if and when the state decides they're not a church.

These are arenas, however, where the state has no standing. And they won't get it unless we give it to them. I understand that most folks do these things in ignorance, that is to say, not deliberately. I write such not to castigate anyone, but to encourage us all to think about these things. When Christians do these things, however, their world view is showing. We honor God with our lips, but our hearts are with the state.

It happens in the family as well. Many well-meaning home schoolers (as with incorporated churches, it is not many, but nearly all who do this) go to the state "authorities" and ask if they might be permitted to teach their children at home. That is enough for the state to assert authority over the children. It is a legal act that shows you accept the state as the authority.

The state has authority given it by God. To disregard that authority is to invite the judgment of the Ultimate Authority. The state is to punish the wicked with the sword. And they frequently go beyond that authority, poking their elephantine nose where it doesn't belong. Our duty is to obey, to walk the extra mile, when such does not cause us to sin. But bowing the knee to Caesar, whether it be at the temple in Rome, or at the office of the school superintendent, is sin.

And if the state suggests that they are the authority, if they threaten us, well we have an advocate before the High Court. Fear Him, and tell Caesar to get out of your garden.

Dr. R.C. Sproul, Jr. is Pastor at St. Peter's Presbyterian Church and the founder of the Highlands Study Center (<http://highlandsstudycenter.org>) This article is used with his permission.

For more information on how to organize and operate as a free-church, contact:

Heal Our Land Ministries
PO Box 220
Bristol, Virginia 24203
417-337-7533, ext. 1 (voice mail)
<http://hushmoney.org>